

DIASPORIC MEDIA USAGE AS SITES FOR CREATION OF IDENTITIES – A STUDY REPORT

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ABSTRACT

Historically and etymologically, a diaspora is a dispersal of people from one country into many, notably the Jewish and Armenian Diasporas of past centuries and, in modern times, the great flows of people out of China and India and into the rest of Asia and the world. For centuries, humans have embarked sometimes wilfully and sometimes forcibly on transnational migrations, thereby creating a process of Diasporas linked by social characteristics like ethnicity, language, religion and culture.

Analysing these varied diasporas in today's global context highlights a very interesting point; i. e. the innovative use of transnational networks of communication as sites of both expressing and creating their identities. The social implications of such diasporic mediascapes are what this paper will seek to understand.

Diasporic groups have often sought media as means of not only seeking connection to their homelands, but also as sites to create and assimilate their identities. The creation of Diasporic websites provides platforms to alumni associations, forthcoming cultural events and festivals to the availability of online versions of newspapers from their countries of origins; Diasporic media has further enhanced intercontinental connections, which has made these diasporic groups, and the diasporic media as sites for genuinely cosmopolitan citizenship would be a logical human outcome of globalisation

This paper seeks to understand the multi-faceted dynamics of media and diaspora by undertaking the case study of the Middle Eastern diasporic television in Los Angeles, which has resulted in the minority and ethnic television video. The paper also studies the case of Kurdish satellite television channel - Med TV, which used media as site for creating political and cultural movement against Turkey, while having its office in London.

KEYWORDS: *Diaspora, Media, Identities & Intercontinental Communication*

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INTRODUCTION

According to Castells, networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies; he called them the basic units of modern society. The present day modern society seems to follow Castell's idea perfectly, where key social structures and activities are organised around electronically processed information networks (Kresler, 2001). The rise of digital society, social networking has dramatically altered the not only the social structures, but also geographic as well as economic boundaries. Nowadays, the associations, communities, structures; created and sustained in digital world are expanding exponentially spanning over not only over different cultures, languages

but also geographic boundaries. The attention of most commentators on globalisation is on powerful intergovernmental organisations and giant corporations; but the myriad economic and cultural activities of transnational groups that are neither government- nor corporate-based constitute a distinct 'globalisation-from-below' (Falk 1993; Brecher, Costello and Smith 2000). This globalisation from below is not given much attention by scholars. Characterised by complex transnational networks (both formal and informal), this pattern of intercontinental migration has many dynamic aspects to it, which has completely changed the way we understand diaspora in modern day. Furthermore, the proliferation of communication technology has led to the creation of diasporic mediascapes (Appadurai 1996), which are the subject of scholarly debate and are under discussion in this paper

Diaspora is a concept with more than 2500 years of history and originates in Greek *speiro* (to sow) and *dia* (over). Scholars of diaspora studies, such as Marienstras (1988), Safran (1991) and Cohen (1997) have reconceptualised diaspora in addressing the diverse experience of populations who have moved and settled across the globe throughout human history. Though for them diaspora is largely a historical category and remains closely linked to the original homeland, its diversification invites new enquiries. As Cohen puts it; Nowadays, with the increased use of the term to describe many kinds of migrants from diverse ethnic backgrounds, a more relaxed definition [of diaspora] seems appropriate. Moreover, transnational bonds no longer have to be cemented by migration or by exclusive territorial claims. In the age of cyberspace, a diaspora can, to some degree, be held together or re-created through the mind, through cultural artefacts and through a shared imagination (1997: 26)

Diaspora, then not only becomes a key element in cultural exchange, but also reflects the mobility of ideas, artefacts and people in time and space. In addition, diaspora, as scholars from within cultural studies further emphasised (Boyarin and Boyarin, 1994; Durham Peters, 1999; Hall, 1990, 1992), are not stable formations defined by blood relations, but they are decentralised cultural formations that sustain real and imagined connections across spread populations and/or a country of origin. Considering these imagined connections across country of origin then brings back to the growing relevance of media impact on diaspora. Digital media has altered the way we practice transnational communication. The use of internet, social media, cinema, television creates a vast nexus of intercontinental exchanges that plays a significant role in shaping and contesting the identities of various diasporas.

This paper aims to see this very dynamism between media and diaspora, and try to analyse how media used as a site to both contest and shape the identities of diasporas.

This influence of media and diaspora is twofold. The important - though brief - ethnographic tradition in audience and media consumption studies (Ang, 1991, 1995; Morley and Silverstone, 1990; Nightingale, 1996; Seiter, 1999; Silverstone, 1994) have inspired a substantial amount of work on diasporic and migrant uses of media and communication technologies, especially in relation to questions of identity and belonging (Aksoy and Robins, 2000; ElNawawi and Iskandar, 2002; Georgiou, 2002, 2006; Gillespie, 1995; Kolar-Panov, 1996; Morley, 1999; Naficy, 1993; Ogan, 2001). On the other hand, research on new technologies – and the internet in particular – has inspired many of the studies on diaspora that explored the significance of networking across boundaries, but also the role of new technologies, particularly in advancing (or restricting) participation in political and cultural affairs (Bailey, Georgiou, Harindranath 2007)

CASE STUDY

The MED TV

Med-TV was the crown of the sovereign state in exile, and attracted the most concentrated opposition of Turkey. The channel was licenced in Britain, to a group of Kurdish citizens, in 'response to calls over recent years, particularly from the Europe wide Kurdish diaspora, for a television station of its own' (Med-TV, 1995). Med TV is the perfect example of how media and diaspora has come together to contest and shape the identity of a particular community. The television channel was one of its kind pan- Kurdish communications that never happened in media before. Launched in 1995, the channel was originally created as a part of structures for Kurds in exile to express themselves. The channel got its name from the Medes who, according to Med-TV, established one of west Asia's ancient civilisations and were the ancestors of the Kurds. The channel established in London, but also had its offices in Stockholm and Brussels as well. The programming content of the show was pretty, varied from entertainment, music, kids' shows, cartoons and politics; the channel covered almost all aspects. Interesting thing regarding these broadcasts was that most was done in the Kurdish language. Furthermore, this channel acted as a sort of bridge bringing together not only the Kurdish community living in exile with a platform to reconnect with their country of origin, but it also acted as an opportunity to bring members of Kurdish political parties to come share their views through various debates and newscasts. Viewers from Kurdistan and Europe participated in live talk shows and debates through the telephone. This enabled the community in exile, continuously be informed about the ground situation in their country of origin, and create a discourse in the international community through the channel.

Minority and Ethnic Television

Minority and Ethnic TV is a result of the dynamic and multi-layered cultures in diaspora that are consumed by the migrant, displaced and communities in exile. The Middle-eastern TV programmes aired in Los Angeles is one such example of such kind of diasporic television. The minority and ethnic TV can also be understood as a facet of decentralised narrowcasting phenomenon, which is also making in-roads due the digital technologies. This kind of television includes, content produced by various communities displaced or living in exile or migrated and having varying relationships with the host land and country of origin, within USA

This type of narrow casting usually divided into three categories of television: ethnic, transnational and exilic. Although these categories are flexible, permeable and at times simultaneous, and can merge under certain circumstances, there are distinguishing features that set them apart. Ethnic television refers to television programmes primarily produced in the host country (in this case, the US) by long-established indigenous minorities. Black Entertainment Television (BET) is an exemplar of this category, most of whose programming centres on the lives and experiences of African-Americans in the United States. The homeland for many of these programmes understood to be in the US, not somewhere else. If ethnic television's programmes inscribe struggles, they are usually intra-cultural (within the USA) not intercultural (between the USA and geographic other cultures). Diaspora television is made in the host country by liminars and exiles, as a response and in tandem with their own transitional and/or provisional status. Television programmes produced by Iranians, Arabs and Armenians and some of the programmes of the Jewish Television Network (JTN) fall within this classification. Minor individual producers, not media conglomerates of the home or host societies, often produce these programmes. Thus, they tend to encode and foreground not only the collective but also individual struggles for authenticity, legitimacy and identity (Karim, 2003).

CONCLUSIONS

Analysing the workings of both MED TV and Minority and Ethnic TV aired in Los Angeles; we found that diasporic media is reshaping the contours of diasporas by providing them the means to create new bonds, identities and cultures whether ethnic, national or religious – transnationally. Diasporic media helps the dislocated or community in exile to sustain and maintain a sense of belonging with their homeland as well as help to shape a new sense of identity with the host land. Jankélévitch notes how people, who are in exile can imagine they are living double lives, carrying around within them ‘inner voices... the voices of the past and of the distant city’, while at the same time submitting to ‘the banal and turbulent life of everyday action’ (1974: 346). Both MED TV and the diasporic minority and ethnic TV elaborate Jankélévitch’s point perfectly. Med TV shows us how media is used a certain diaspora to connect with the past conflict, and try to use the very same media in resolution of the Kurdish conflict. On the other hand, the minority and ethnic TV shows how the Middle Eastern diaspora is living its everyday life in the host land and trying to gain some semblance of identity in the new homeland.

Elaborating on the point of using media by a certain diaspora to contest identity, we found that Med-TV worked as the national television of the Kurds. In more than one ways, the TV channel questioned the sovereignty of Turkish State both politically and culturally. Furthermore, the logo of the channel was in the colours of red yellow and green – the colours of Kurdish Flag. The logo, then in turn became the symbol of Kurdish right to statehood against Turkey. Every time Med TV went on air, the channel in turn asserted the nationalist perspective of the Kurds and shows how the diaspora used media to achieve their own end. Apart from the flag, another symbol of Kurdish nationalism on Med TV was the playing of the Kurdish national anthem before the daily menu. The combination of logo and anthem further reiterates how the Kurdish diaspora used media to further its end.

Much more than a war of meanings and identities, this was a conflict between two nationalisms: one that has achieved state power and one that struggles for statehood. Med-TV, as a broadcaster, and Turkey, as a state, share the same land and population, i. e. northern Kurdistan, in the language of nationalists, or the southeast, in the language of the Turkish state. There is one territorial base and two contenders for loyalty. In spite of the imbalance of power between Turkey and Med-TV on the international level, the channel was not very helpless. Another thing that made Med TV radical was, its use of the Kurdish language instead of Turkish, which also under the Turkish Constitution is illegal to teach any other language than Turkish. Med-TV provided such instruction to millions of viewers on a daily basis. For example, the programme *Roj Bas, Mamosta* (Hello, Teacher!) consisted of a classroom setting, where a teacher instructed children in their native tongue, using a blackboard, books and other teaching materials (Ibid)

Med-TV has seriously challenged Turkey’s constitutional stipulation of a pure, sovereign Turkish presence in the country especially it’s southeast. It established relations with Kurdish viewers, not as members of an audience but rather as citizens of a Kurdish state and by doingso it exercised de-territorialised sovereignty. Every day, viewers experienced the citizenship of a borderless state with its national flag, national anthem, national parliament, national television and national news agency. Indeed, every day Med-TV raised the Kurdish flag in about two million homes. It was obvious that Turkey would treat each satellite dish as a Kurdish flag hoisted on the rooftops of every building in the southeast.

With regard to the ethnic and minority television, we see a new paradigm shift vis-à-vis the technology and globalisation. This type of diasporic television uses narrowcasting rather decentralised global narrowcasting, as opposed to the transnational multimedia conglomerates, which have consolidated their monopoly on centralised broadcasting like

Associated Press (AP) to Agence-France Presse (APP) to Cable News Network (CNN). As such, ethnic and minority television even though on a small scale, but is also changing or trying to change the flow of information. In doing so the diasporic media also change the discourse, starting new debates and helps to create and sustain new identities of displaced communities in the host land as their new homeland, but at the same time keeping the ties with their countries of origin alive. The interesting thing regarding the diasporic or ethnic television is that, it is being produced by usually by local, independent, minority entrepreneurs for consumption by a small, cohesive population, which because of its diaspora status, is cosmopolitan, multicultural and multilingual, which makes it global in nature. However, the content is aired in foreign languages, pertaining to a particular diaspora; as such, the nature becomes that of local. This dynamic nature of diasporic television is what makes it so special in understanding the new dimensions of media and diaspora. This is a ritual genre, in that it helps the displaced communities to negotiate between the two states of exile: the rule-bound structures of the home and host societies (*societas*) and the formlessness of exilic liminality in which many rules and structures are suspended (*communitas*). The ritual diaspora television genre introduces a sense of order in the life of its viewers by producing a series of systematic patterns of narration; signification and consumption that set up continually fulfilled or postponed expectations. I have elaborated on these generic issues elsewhere (Naficy 1993).

Analysing the Middle Eastern television aired in Los Angeles, the study revealed that the shows tackled the complexity and dichotomies of eastern and western cultures. The age-old clash of these cultures is transformed into programme content, which helps the diasporic communities to identify with the battle of identities and use the diasporic television to form new identities as well. Furthermore, what such minority television has done is that being both global as well as local; it has attracted varied audiences, which has further helped the diasporas to sustain their original identities. Also, help in assimilating their cultures and identities of the homeland in the host land, with members of new communities.

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